



THIS WAS FORT UTAH (also known as Fort Provo) as interpreted in painting by Samuel Jepperson, early-day Provo artist. Note bastion for cannon erected in center. Small stream in foreground was from spring about 25 rods

northeast of fort from which the settlers obtained culinary water. Original fort was located 20 rods east of present Geneva Road, about 30 rods south of Provo River. (Photoprint by Joseph M. Boel)

Beginning of Colonization In Provo

Fort Utah: First Pioneer Settlement in Valley

(First of two articles)

By N. La Verl Christensen
Announcement that the Utah Lake Lions Club, in cooperation with Provo City, will build a public park at the site of old Fort Utah has prompted many questions:

- What was Fort Utah?
- Where was it located?
- Why was it built?

Fort Utah, you might say, was Provo's first housing project—a sizable number of log cabins inside a stockade built for protection against the Indians.

Indeed it was the very beginning of Provo, dating back to 1849. Begun April 3 of that year, only days after arrival of the first Mormon settlers here, the fort provided the only practicable means of colonizing Utah Valley, home base of often-hostile Ute Indians.

Two Locations

Fort Utah (also known as Fort Provo) had two locations.

Originally it was built on the south side of Provo River about 20 rods east of the present Geneva Road and about 40 rods north of Center Street—or just a short distance northeast of the historical marker erected in 1937 by the Daughters of Utah Pioneers (Provo Camp 7) on the Walter Cox property to commemorate its place in history.

In the spring of 1850—the settlers decided to move to higher ground because of flooding of Provo River which turned the fort area into a “sea of despair.” They built their second fort at the location of present-day North (Sowiette) Park at Fifth West and Fifth North.

Was the first fort actually dismantled and moved or did it remain in use at least until after the new one was completed? This is a question for which there seems no clearcut answer. Both versions can be found in Provo histories. With Indians hostilities a constant threat, logic suggests the pioneers would not have dismantled one fort until the other were at least partially completed.

Colonization Plan

Decision to send about 30 men to colonize Utah Valley “for the purpose of farming and fishing and instructing the Indians” was made at a council meeting March 10, 1849 at the home of Heber C. Kimball in Salt Lake City, with Brigham Young presiding, according to Church historical records.

On Tuesday, March 13, prospective members of the colony met at President Young's office to receive instructions. John S. Higbee was chosen to lead the expedition as president of the Provo Branch of the church.

The settlers and their families numbered about 150 souls, according to historians. They entered the valley late in March (there is controversy on the actual date and this will be subject of a subsequent article

soon.)

Some distance from Provo River the Mormons were met by Ute Indians who blocked their progress until they had “sworn by the sun” that they would not drive the redman from their lands.

At the site where the original Fort Utah was built, the pioneers found fertile soil to the east, south and west; an abundance of timber, especially from “Boxelder Island” where the river forked a short distance to the west; and ample water.

There was additional favorable factor in the location. The river, and a smaller stream running southwest, seemed to shut out the large “Mormon crickets” which infested the valley. The memory of the Salt Lake Valley cricket episode undoubtedly was fresh in the pioneers' minds at the time.

Fort Utah was pretty well completed six weeks after the energetic settlers began construction. This description of the fort comes from PROVO, PIONEER MORMON CITY, published in 1942 by the Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration:

“Built around an ancient mound, Fort Utah measured 20 by 40 rods, and was surrounded

by a 14-foot stockade with gates at the east and west ends. Boxelder trees, more durable and more accessible than cottonwood trees, were used for lumber. Within the stockade, log cabins, generally roofed with split lumber and dirt, were grouped side by side. Each boasted two cloth-covered windows. (The pioneers had no glass at that time.) Puncheons were used for flooring. The vacant spaces between the houses were filled with pickets embedded closely together in the ground. A cattle corral, attached to the southeast corner of the stockade, was used at night, and a guardhouse was erected within the corral. Smaller private corrals were placed behind some of the cabins. A brass cannon, upon the mound, commanded the surrounding territory. . . .”

The mound on which the cannon was placed apparently didn't have sufficient elevation because about Sept. 1, 1849 the settlers erected a bastion, elevating a 30-foot-square platform with log railings on which the cannon was mounted.

Periodically they fired the cannon to impress the Indians. Despite this—and despite Brigham Young's advise to “feed

instead of fight” the redmen tensions mounted almost from the start.

Unlike Salt Lake Valley, which had not been a favorite Indian campground, Utah Valley was a treasured haunt and the annual gathering place of the Ute tribes during the spawning season when fish moving up the river from Utah Lake could be caught with little effort for traditional feasting.

Relationships were already somewhat strained when the settlers arrived because four or five renegade redmen had been slain by whites in a skirmish near present-day Pleasant Grove March 4 of that year. This was the first battle in Utah between the Mormons and the Indians. It took place when a company of about 30 men from Salt Lake Valley went after the Indian band which had stolen a sizeable herd of cattle. The site of this skirmish was given the name Battle Creek.

Indian-settler relations were further kept off balance repeated by thefts and threats by the former and an unwarranted killing of an Indian by three whites Aug. 1, 1849 in an altercation over a shirt allegedly stolen by him.

(To be concluded.)

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